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Witness in contra probe dies

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WASHINGTON — A key witness in a federal probe into gun-running and possible violations of US neutrality law by a group of soldiers of fortune supporting Nicaraguan rebels died of a suspected drug overdose yesterday in Van Nuys, Calif.

Steven Carr, 27, of Naples, Fla., was found dead in the driveway of his sister's house at 4:05 a.m., said an official of the Los Angeles County Coroner's office.

Investigator M. Riddle said the cause of death was "suspected drug overdose — cocaine." He declined to answer further questions pending an autopsy today.

Carr's lawyer, Gerry Berry of Naples, Fla., said in a telephone interview yesterday that while he did not know the circumstances of Carr's death, "It's suspicious to me that he would die of an overdose."

Berry said he knew that Carr "dabbled" in drugs, "but he knew his way around and he'd not mess with anything that he couldn't handle."

Berry said he last saw his client shortly after Carr was released from a Florida prison in early November after serving about seven months on a probation violation.

Berry acknowledged that investigators from the US attorney's office in Miami had questioned Carr on several occasions about trips Carr had made to Central America in 1984 and 1985.

Carr and four other self-described soldiers of fortune helping to train Nicaraguan rebels were captured in northern Costa Rica in April 1985 and charged with possession of explosives and disturbing the civil peace.

Carr remained in a Costa Rican prison awaiting trial for nearly a year. He was released on bail last spring and returned to Florida.

While in prison, Carr said in separate interviews with the Globe and other news organiza-

tions that he and other Americans had fought on behalf of the rebels in military raids. Carr also said that he and others had helped collect tons of military supplies in southern Florida, which were flown to the rebels, called contras, in Central America in 1985.

The US attorney's office in Miami, after seeing accounts of Carr's interviews, sent a prosecutor and an FBI agent to Costa Rica to interview Carr.

Berry said those interviews continued "for some time. It was obvious they were interested in what he had to say, but I don't know how close anyone was to indictments."

The US attorney's office in Miami could not be reached for comment, but an office spokesman said recently that she expected charges to be filed in the case "very soon."

The purpose of the investigation was to determine whether there had been an organized attempt to send military supplies and assistance to the rebels after Congress had cut off such aid in October 1984, and whether US government officials participated in the effort.

One of Carr's colleagues, still in prison in Costa Rica, told reporters that he had discussed such covert aid with Robert Owen, a State Department consultant and close friend of Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, who was fired last month as a national security aide for his role in the Iran arms-contra scandal.

Owen refused to answer questions about his work in Central America on behalf of the Nicaraguan rebels when he appeared before the Senate Intelligence Committee last week.

Carr said the private Americans who recruited him told him the Central Intelligence Agency was coordinating their work in Central America. The CIA, which was prohibited at the time from engaging in military activities for the rebels, denied the charge.

Carr, however, has denied the assertion of one of his acquaintances that their group had planned to assault on the US embassy in San Jose, Costa Rica, and blame the action on the Nicaragua's ruling Sandinista government.

Carr has also been interviewed by aides to Sen. John F. Kerry, who for more than a year has been investigating alleged violations of law by the rebels and their supporters.

A representative of Kerry's office said yesterday that information from the taped interviews would be given to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which is following up on Kerry's inquiries.

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